

IN EVERY ISSUE

When Do I Tell Her?

BY JASAN ZIMMERMAN

“What’s that scar from?” she asked.

I gave her a quick brush-off explanation. I could see where the conversation was going. “How many surgeries have you had?” It was all downhill from there.

We were a few weeks into the relationship when I first went over my medical history, including the reason for the scar—lung surgery to remove a “benign mass of unknown origin” when I was 8.

I can recite the surgery list from my 33 years of life like some people can recite a baseball card want list: neuroblastoma excised from the right side of my neck at 6 months old, the aforementioned lung surgery, a bronchoscopy when I was 11, total thyroidectomy for thyroid cancer when I was 15, surgery to revise the Frankenstein-like thyroidectomy scar when I was 18, two sinus surgeries (21 and 22), hand surgery for a broken bone when I was 28, and a neck exploration when I was 30.

The most recent surgery, just after I turned 31, was to remove a branchial cleft cyst next to my trachea that the neck exploration didn’t find. She visited me in the hospital after the surgery and was clearly uncomfortable. So was I.

She was everything I thought I wanted in a woman—tall, blonde, and hot. Plus, she told me she had been a caregiver to a quadriplegic when she was in college, so I thought she would have some compassion.

All of a sudden, she explained to me that my medical history was a big issue for her. The tension became palpable after that. Our relationship was over three weeks later.

So, when should I tell a woman who I’m romantically interested in about my long, storied medical history? There’s no easy answer.

Everyone has some skeletons in the closet, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to expose them to someone when you first meet them. You’ll never hear me say, “Hi, I’m Jasan, and I’m a cancer survivor.” But when should the bombshell drop? There’s much more of an art to it.

If a woman opens up and shares some of her trials and tribulations, it makes it easier for me to share. But there's no easy way to introduce the topic. I pay lots of attention to what she says to see if I can segue easily into my story.

My long-standing fear is that I'll scare a woman away with the revelation about my medical history, so I'm sometimes more inclined to bring the subject up fairly early in the relationship, at least within the first month or so. That way, if it ends the relationship, it's too early for me to get hurt as much.

I've always given women an out, though, after first telling them about my cancer history.

But no woman has bailed out on me—at least not immediately. Five or six months later, yes, but not immediately.

So when do I tell her? I wish it was as cut and dry as telling her my middle name or telling her about my love of sports. I just have to go with my gut feeling and hope for the best, until the day comes when I find the right woman and never have to tell my story again.

Jasan Zimmerman lives in Palo Alto, California, and is currently dating a woman who knows his medical history.